

# The Colin Wiles blog

Thursday 8 April 2021

## Allan Brigham: Housing friend

I doubt many of you will have heard of [Allan Brigham](#) but he was one of the most remarkable people I have ever known. Allan died last September after a long illness. Last week, over 200 people gathered on Zoom to celebrate his life.

For much of his working life Allan was a road sweeper in Cambridge, but that only tells a small part of his story. He was also a local historian, a blue badge guide, a housing and planning activist, an educator, and in 2009 he was awarded an honorary degree by Cambridge University, alongside Bill and Melinda Gates and Shirley Williams. A group of his friends assembled outside The Senate House on that day with a big banner reading *Allan Brigham MA, Roads Scholar*.



For the purpose of this blog he was also a firm friend of our sector, an “outsider” who could spread our concerns to a much wider audience. We need more people like him.

I first met Allan in 1988 when we moved into his road. He had moved to the city over a decade earlier and could only find work as a road sweeper, but it was a job he kept for over three decades, often rising at 4.30am. He was also a union activist, fighting for better pay and conditions for his colleagues. This experience informed his views about housing. He would regularly talk about his workmates who could no longer live in the city and often had to commute in from distant villages. He wanted Cambridge to work for everyone, rich and poor.

Early in the century a few of us set up a group in Romsey Town, our neighbourhood in Cambridge, to campaign on planning and housing issues. We fought against developers who sought to evade their responsibilities to provide mixed communities, and we highlighted shoddy developments – we even made it to the pages of [The Daily Mail](#)!

In his activism, Allan was very much for Town over Gown. He was always reminding us that the town of Cambridge pre-dated the university. Its royal charter was granted at least 80

years before the university. His tours had a focus on the town side of Cambridge, its industrial past, the coming of the railway, the poverty and struggles of working people.

He was anti-nimby and very much in favour of growth, but growth that worked for the people and not for developers and their shareholders. You can see an example of his views in this [speech](#) at Great St Mary's, the university church. He repeatedly pointed out that Cambridge had always been growing, and had grown at a much faster rate in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Everyone, he said, lived in a place that had once been open countryside, and that it was pointless to push growth beyond the green belt as this just caused traffic problems. The key was to make Cambridge a compact, walkable and liveable city.

In 2006 I was involved in organising the CIH Eastern conference. I asked Allan to contribute to a book we produced to tie in with the conference, called [Bringing it all Back Home](#). His half of the book was a social history of Romsey Town, the area where we lived. It had been built for railway workers in the nineteenth century and is a closely packed area of terraced houses. He interviewed a number of local people and charted the social, physical and social changes that had affected the area over the previous 40 years. In his summing up he wrote:

“Romsey looks very similar today to the way it looked in the sixties. But the social composition of the area has changed dramatically. The last forty years have seen the traditional working-class residents in retreat. But those living in council houses have a security of tenure that gives them stability and they remain a significant part of the community. Ironically the successful regeneration of the area has made owner-occupation unaffordable on manual wages while the ‘right to buy’, although benefiting those who took it up, leaves a diminished number of family houses to rent.

“(Romsey) has a clear physical identity and many points of contact – pubs, clubs, two community centres, allotments, two primary schools, pre-school nurseries and after-school clubs. One of the most important meeting places remains the ‘Rec’, where dog walkers, joggers and basketball players rub shoulders with teenagers ‘hanging out’ or playing football. On the route to and from the primary school it is also where parents and children pause to chat.”

The importance of ‘chatting’ as a means of gluing communities together was evident on his tours. At the outset he asked everyone to talk to each other and to make friends. Even when he was sweeping the streets he could often be seen chatting to residents and tourists. I always said that the city council should have employed him to chat all day. It would probably have done more for community cohesion than almost any other form of spending. No one left an encounter with Allan feeling more miserable than they did at the outset.

This sociability made Allan stand out as a human being. He was always smiling, always cheerful. Being out with him was a challenge because people would be stopping him every few minutes. He was also full of energy, always busy with a new project – writing, campaigning, lecturing. He would go into schools to educate kids about litter and he sat on the board of the Cambridge museum for 30 years.

Another quality was his stoicism. He was in pain for many years and yet never showed it, never complained. I last met him in July 2019 when we walked around Romsey and visited the new [mosque](#) and his allotment. As we parted I went to embrace him but he flinched. He

could not touch anyone because of the pain. As I said at the outset, he was a remarkable human being and a friend of affordable housing. May he rest in peace.

### About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

